Short Stories by William Gibson: Skinner's Room

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- William Ford Gibson

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Skinner's room

Halloween, she finds her way up into some old hotel above Geary Tenderloin's cannibal fringe down one side the gray shells of big stores off the other. Pressing her cheek to cold glass to spy the bridge's nearest tower — Skinner's room is there — all lit tonight with torches and carnival bulbs.

Too far away but still it reassures her, in here with these foreigners who've done too much of something and one them's making noises in the bathroom — when someone touches her, cold tinger on bare skin above the waist-band of her jeans sliding it in under her sweater and the hem of Skinner's jacket, not the touch that makes her jump so much as the abrupt awareness of how hot she is, a greenhouse sweat, zipped up behind the unbreathing horsehide of the ancient jacket, it seams and elbows sueded pale with wear, a jungle of hardware as she swings around — D-rings, zip-pulls, five-pointed stars — her thumbs tip against the hole in the knife's blade, opening it, locked, ready. The blades's no longer than her little finger, shaped something like the head of a bird, its eye the hole that gives the thumb purchase. Blade and handle are brushed stainless, like the heavy clip, with its three precise machine screws, that secures it firmly to boottop, belt or wristband. Edge of serrated razor.

The man — boy, really — blinks at her. He hasn't seen the blade he's felt its meaning, her deep body-verb, and his hands withdraws. He steps back unsteadily, grinning wetly and dunking the sodden end of a small sigar in a stemmed glass of some pharmaceutically clear liquid. "I am selebrating," he says, and draws on the cigar.

"Halloween?"

Not a noun he remembers at the moment. He just looks at her like she isn't there, then blows a blue stream of up at the suite's high celling. Lowers the cigar. Licks his lips.

"I am living now," he says, "in this hotel, one hundred fifty days." His jacket is leather, too, but not like Skinner's. Some thin-skinned animal whose hide drapes like heavy silk, the color of tobacco. She remembers the smell of yellow-spinned magazines un the Skinner's room, some so old the pictures are only shades of gray, the way the city looks sometimes from the bridge. Could she find that animal, there?

"This is a fine hotel." He dips the wet green end of the cigar into the glass again.

She thumbs the blade release and closes the knife against her

thigh. He blinks at the click. He's having troubles focusing. "One hundred Fifty days."

Behind him, she sees that the others have tumbled together on the huge bed. Leather, lace, white skin, bright henna. Sounds from the bathroom are getting worse but nobody seems to hear. In the jungles heat of Skinner's jacket she slips the knife back up, under her belt. She's come up here for whatever she can find, really, but what she's found is a hard desperation, a lameness of spirit, that twist her up inside, so maybe that's why she's sweating so, steaming…

Saw them all come laughing, drunk, out of two Mercedes taxis; she fell into step on impulse, her dusty black horsehide tading into the glossier blacks of silk hose, leather skirts, boots with jingling spurs like jewelry, furs. Sweeping past the doorman's braided coats, their gas masks, into the tall marble lobby with its carpet and mirrors and waxed furniture its bronze-doored elevators and urns of sand.

"One hundred fifty days," he says, mouth slack and moist, "In this hotel."

The bridge maintains the integrity of its span within a riot of secondary construction, a coral growth facilitated in large part by carbon-fiber compounds. Some sections of the original structure, badly rusted, have been coated with a transparent material whose tensile strength far exceeds of the original steel, some are splined with the black and impervious carbon-fiber, others are laced with makeshift ligatures of taut and rusting wire.

Secondary construction has occurred piecemeal, to no set plan, employing every imaginable technique and material; the result is amorphous and startlingly organic in appearance.

At night, illuminated by Christmas bulbs, by recycled neon, by torchlight, the bridge is a magnet to the restless, the disaffected. By day, viewed from the towers of the city, it recalls the ruin of Brighton Pier in the closing decade of the previous century — seen through some cracked kaleidoscope of vernacular style.

Lately Skinner's hip can't manage the first twenty feet of ladder, so he hasn't been down to try the elevator the African welded to the rivet-studded steel of the tower. He peers at it trough the hatch in the floor. It looks like the yellow plastic basket of a lineman's cherry picker, cogging its way up and down a greasy-toothed steel track like a miniature funicular railway. He admires whoever it was built this room, this caulked box of ten ply fir, perched and humming in the wind. The rooms floor is a double layer of pressure-treated two-by-fours laid on edge, broken by an achingly graceful form he no longer really sees: the curve of the big cable drown up over its saddle of steel, 17464 pensil-thick wires.

The little pop up television on the blanket across his chest

continues its dumb show. The girl brought it for him. Stolen probably. He never turns the sound on. The constant play of images on liquid crystal screen is obscurely comforting, like the half sensed movements in an aquarium. Life is there. He can't remember when he ceased to be able to distinguish commercials from programming.

His room measures fifteen by fifteen feet, the plywood walls softened by perhaps a dozen coats of white latex paint. Higher reflective index than aluminum foil, he thinks 17464 strands per cable. Facts. Often, now, he feels himself a void through which facts tumbles, facts and faces, making no connections.

His clothes hang from mismatch iron coat hooks screwed at precise intervals along the wall. The girl wears his jacket. Lewis Leathers Great Portland Street. She asks where that is Jacket older than she is. Looks at the picture in the National Geographic, crouched there with her bare white feet on the carpet he took from the broken office block.

Memory flickers like liquid crystal. She brings him food, pumps the Coleman's chipped red tank. Remember to open the window, a crack Japanese cans, heat up when you pull a tab. Questions she asked him. Who built the bridge? Everyone. No, she says, the old part, the bridge. San Francisco, he tells her. Bone of iron, grace of cable, hangs us here. How long you live here? Years. Spoons him his meal from a mess kit stamped 1952.

This is his room. His bad. Foam, topped with a sheepskin, bottom sheet over that Blankets Catalytic heater. The window is circular, leaded, each segment stained a different color. You can see the city through the bull's-eye of clear yellow glass in the center.

Sometimes he remember building the room.

The bridge's bones, its stranded tendons, are lost within an accretion of dreams tattoo parlors, shooting galleries, pinball arcades, dimly lit stalls stacked with damp stained years of men's magazines, chili joints, premises of unlicensed denturists, fireworks stalls, cut bait sellers, betting shops, sushi counters, pawnbrokers, wonton counters, love hotels, hot dog stands, a tortilla factory, Chinese greengrocers, liquor stores, herbalists, chiropractors, barbers, tackle shops, and bars.

These are dreams of commerce, their locations generally corresponding with the decks originally intended for vehicular traffic. Above them, toward the peak of the cable towers, lift intricate barrios, zones of more private fantasy, sheltering an unnumbered population, of uncertain means and obscure occupation.

Three month before, she'd first come upon the bridge in fog and have seen the sellers of fruits and vegetables with their goods spread out on blankets, lit by carbide lamps and guttering smudge pots. Farm people from coast. She'd come from that direction herself, down past

the stunted pines of Little River and Mendocino, Ukiah,s twisted oak hills.

She stared back into the cavern mouth, trying to make sense of what she saw. Steam rising from the pots of soup vendors carts. Neon scavenged from the ruins of Oakland. How it ran together, blurred, melting in the fog. Surfaces of plywood, marble, corrugated plastic, polished brass, sequins, Styrofoam, tropical hardwoods, mirror, etched Victorian glass, chrome gone dull in the sea air — all the mad richness of it, its randomness — a tunnel roofed by a precarious shack town mountainside climbing toward the first of the cable towers. She stood a long time, looking, then walked straight in, past a boy selling coverless yellowed paperbacks and a cafe where a blind parrot was chained on a metal perch, picking at a chicken's freshly severed foot.

Skinner surfaces from a dream of a bicycle covered with barnacles and sees that the girl is back. She's hung his leather jacket on its proper hook and squats now on her pallet of raw-edged black foam.

Bicycle. Barnacles.

Memory: A man called Fass snagged his tackle, hauled the bicycle up, trailing streamers of kelp. People laughed. Fass carried the bicycle away. Later he built a place to eat, a three-stool shanty leached far out over the void with Super Glue and shackles. Sold cold cooked mussels and Mexican beer, the bicycle slung above the little bar. The walls inside were shingled with picture postcards. Nights, he slept curled behind the bar. One morning the place was gone, Fass with it, just a broken shackle swinging in the wind and a few splinters of timber still adhering to the galvanized iron wall of a barber shop. People came, stood'at the edge, looked down at the water between the toes of their shoes.

The girl asks him if he's hungry. He says no. Asks him if he's eaten. He says no. She opens the tin foot chest and sorts through cans. He watches her pump the Coleman.

He says open the window a crack. The circular window pivots in its oak frame. Gotta eat, she says.

She'd like to tell him about going to the hotel but she doesn't have words for how it made her feel. She feeds him soup, a spoonful at a time. Helps him to the tankless old china toilet behind the faded roses of the chintz curtain. When he's done she draws water from the roof-tank line and pours it in. Gravity does the rest. Thousands of flexible transparent lines are looped and bundled, down through the structure, pouring raw sewage into the bay.

"Europe…" she tries to begin.

He looks up at her, mouth full of soup.

She guesses his hair must've been blond once. He swallows the soup. "Europe what?" Sometimes he'll snap right into focus like this, if

she asks him a question, but now she's not sure what the question is.

"Paris," he says, and his eyes tell her he's lost again, "I went there. London, too. Great Portland Street." He nods, satisfied somehow. "Before the devaluation…" Wind sighs past the window. She thinks about climbing out on the roof. The rungs up to the hatch there are carved out of sections of two-by-four, painted the same white as the walls. He uses one for a towel rack. Undo the bolt. You raise the hatch with your head; Your eyes are level with gull shit. Nothing there, really. Flat tarpaper roof, a couple of two-by-four uprights: One flies a tattered Confederated flag, the other a faded orange windsock.

When he's asleep again, she closes the Coleman, scrubs out the pot, washes the spoon, pours the soupy water down the toilet, wipes pot and spoon, puts them away. Pulls on her hightop sneakers, laces them up. She puts on his jacket and checks that the knife's still clipped behind her belt.

She lifts the hatch in the floor and climbs through, finding the first rungs of the ladder with her feet. She lowers the hatch closed, careful not to wake him. She climbs down past the riveted face of the tower, to the waiting yellow basket of the elevator. Looking up, she sees the vast cable there, where it swoops out of the bottom of Skinner's room, vanishing through a taut and glowing wall of milky plastic film, a greenhouse; halogen bulbs throw spiky plant shadows on the plastic.

The elevator whines, creeping down the face of the tower, beside the ladder she doesn't use anymore, past a patchwork of plastic, plywood, sections of enameled steel stitched together from the skins of dead refrigerators. At the bottom of the fat-toothed track, she climbs out. She sees the man Skinner calls the African coming toward her along the catwalk, bearlike shoulders hunched in a ragged tweed overcoat. He carries a meter of some kind, a black box, dangling red and black wires tipped with alligator lips. The broken plastic frames of his glasses have been mended with silver duct tape. He smiles shyly as he eases past her, muttering something about brushes.

She rides another elevator, a bare steel cage, down to the first deck. She walks in the direction of Oakland, past racks of old clothes and blankets spread with the negotiable detritus of the city.

She finds Maria Paz in a coffee shop with windows on the bay's gray dawn. The room has the texture of an old ferry, dark dented varnish over plain heavy wood. As though someone's sawn it from a tired public vessel, lashing to the outermost edge of the structure. (Nearer Oakland, the wingless corpse of a 747 houses the kitchens of nine Thai restaurants.)

Maria Paz has eyes like slate and a tattoo of a blue swallow on the inside of her left ankle. Maria Paz smokes Kools, one after another,

lighting them with a brushed chrome Zippo she takes from her purse. Each time she flicks it open, a sharp whiff of benzene cuts across the warm smells of coffee and scrambled eggs.

She sits with Maria Paz, drinks coffee, watches her smoke Kools. She tells Maria Paz about Skinner.

"How old is he?" she asks.

"Old… I don't know."

"And he lives over the cable saddle on the first tower?"

"Yes."

"The tops of the towers. you know about that?"

"No."

“From the days when the people came, out from the cities to live here.”

"Why did they?"

Maria Paz looks at her over the Zippo.

"Nowhere to live. Bridge closed to traffic three years…"

"Traffic?"

Maria Paz laughs. "Too many cars. Dug them tunnels under the bay. For cars, for maglevs. . bridge too old. Closed it before the devaluations. No money. One night the people came. No plan, no signal. Just came. Climbed the chain link. Chain link fell. Threw the concrete in the bay. Climbed the towers. Dawn came, they were here, on the bridge, singing, and the cities saw the world was watching. Japanese airlift, food and medical. National embarrassment. Forget the water cannons, sorry." Maria Paz smiles.

"Skinner? You think he came then?"

"Maybe, he's old as you think. How long you been on the bridge?"

"Three months?"

"I was born here," says Maria Paz.

The cities had their own pressing difficulties. Not an easy century, America quite clearly in decline and the very concept of nation-states called increasingly into question. The squatters were allowed to remain. Among their numbers were entrepreneurs, natural politicians, artists, men and women of untapped energy and talent. The world watched as they began to build. Shipments of advanced adhesives arrived from Japan. A Belgian manufacturer donated a boatload of carbon-fiber beams. Teams of scavengers rolled through the cities on broken flatbeds, returning to the bridge piled high with discarded building materials.

The bridge and its inhabitants became a tourist attraction.

She walks back in the early light that filters through windows, through sheets of wind-shivered plastic. The bridge never sleeps, but this is a quiet time. A man is arranging fish on a bed of shaved ice in a wooden cart. The pavement beneath her feet is covered with gum

wrappers and the flattened filters of cigarettes. A drunk is singing somewhere overhead. Maria Paz left with a man, someone she'd been waiting for.

She thinks about the story and tries to imagine Skinner there, the night they took the bridge, young then, his leather jacket new and glossy.

She thinks about the Europeans in the hotel on Geary.

She reaches the first elevator, the cage and leans back against its bars as it rises up its patched tunnel, where the private lives of her neighbors are walled away in tiny handmade spaces. Stepping from the cage, she sees the African squatting in his tweed overcoat in the light cast by a caged bulb on a long yellow extension cord, the motor of his elevator spread out around him on fresh sheets of newsprint. He looks up at her apologetically.

"Adjusting the brushes," he says.

"I'll climb." She goes up the ladder. Always keep one hand and one foot on the ladder, Skinner told her, don't think about where you are and don't look down, it's a long climb, up toward the smooth sweep of cable. Skinner must've done it thousands of times, uncounted, unthinking. She reaches the top of this ladder, makes a careful transfer to the second, the short one, that leads to his room.

He's there, of course, asleep, when she scrambles up through the hatch. She tries to move as quietly as she can, but the jingle of the jacket's chrome hardware disturbs him, or reaches him in his dream, because he calls something out, voice thick with sleep. It might be a woman's name, she thinks. It certainly isn't hers.

In Skinner's dream now they all run forward, and the police are hesitating, falling back. Overhead the steady drum of the network helicopters with their lights and cameras. Thin rain falls as Skinner locks his cold fingers in the chain link and starts to climb. Behind him a roar goes up, drowning the bullhorns of the police and the National Guard, and Skinner's climbing, kicking the narrow toes of his boots into chain link as though he's gone suddenly weightless — floating up, really, rising on the crowd's roar, the ragged cheer torn from all their lungs. He's there, at the top, for one interminable instant. He jumps. He's the first. He's on the bridge, running, running toward Oakland, as the chain link crashes behind him, his cheeks wet with rain.

And somewhere off in the night, on the Oakland side, another fence falls, and they meet, these two lost armies, and flow together as one, and huddle there, at the bridge's center, their arms around one another, singing ragged wordless hymns.

At dawn, the first climbers begin to scale the towers.

Skinner is with them.

She's brewing coffee on the Coleman when she sees him open his

eyes.

"I thought you'd gone," he says.

"I took a walk. I'm not going anywhere. There's coffee."

He smiled, eyes sliding out of focus. "I was dreaming…"

"Dreaming what?"

"I don't remember… we were singing. In the rain…"

She brings him coffee in the heavy china cup he likes, holds it, helps him drink "Skinner, were you here when they came from the cities? When they took the bridge?"

He looks up at her with a strange expression. His eyes widen. He coughs on the coffee, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Yes," he says, "yes. In the rain. We were singing. I remember that."

"Did you build this place, Skinner? This room? Do you remember?"

"No," he says, "no. . sometimes I don't remember… we climbed. Up. We climbed up past the helicopters. We waved at them, some people fell… at the top. We got to the top…"

"What happened then?"

He smiles. "The sun came out. We saw the city."